

## Jess

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## 6 Jess

### Reputable content

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#### Chapter overview

This chapter introduces, illustrates, and analyses the finding that young people follow, share, and use health-related information that is shared by reputable social media accounts. The powerful influence of social media on young people's health-related behaviours suggests that social media should be harnessed by governments, health and wellbeing organisations, and schools/teachers as an important space in which to educate young people about their health. Yet, these stakeholders, as well as celebrities, sportsmen and -women, and 'sports' brands need to be aware of the trust young people place in them, and ensure that they too act responsibly on social media.

A digitally animated case study video of the evidence presented in this chapter can be accessed from: <http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/3059/>

#### Chapter structure and underpinning evidence

This chapter is organised into three main sections. In Section One a narrative of a young person – Jess – is presented to tell the story from young people's perspectives of how young people follow, share, and use health-related information that is shared by reputable social media accounts. The narrative was constructed from an extensive data set (as detailed in Chapter 1) and illustrates the voices and experiences of over 1,300 young people in the UK. Direct quotes from the data are shown in quotation marks. In Section Two – the stakeholder response – an interpretation of the narrative and recommended actions for research, policy, and practice are provided. The profile of the stakeholder group was international, multi-sector, and multi-disciplinary and included teachers, international academics (UK, Ireland, Sweden, Netherlands, Spain, Australia, China), and trusts/organisations in the UK (such as the NHS, Youth Sport Trust) that have a focus on youth health and wellbeing. The stakeholder group watched a digital animated video of the case study narrative<sup>1</sup> and collaborated to produce the response during a one-day workshop (as detailed in Chapter 1). In Section Three, the key messages that emerge from the narrative and the stakeholder response are summarised.

### Section One: young person's narrative – Jess

Jess uses social media to follow ‘celebrities’ and to ‘see the gossip’. Sometimes the ‘celebrities’ are ‘sportspeople’ or ‘rappers’. Most of the time, however, Jess follows the stars of ‘reality TV shows’; the ones that people call ‘fake celebrities’. On social media, Jess can ‘learn about their life’, and she has seen them ‘go from what they were to what they are now’. The ‘fake celebrities’ lives give Jess hope that she could become a celebrity one day. Jess is also inspired by ‘something called the Instagram model’. The ‘Instagram model’ is where ‘someone can be *so* famous’ and ‘only through a few pictures’. The ‘Instagram model’ is definitely something Jess could use. She just needs to post really ‘polished’ and ‘perfect’ images about her life and make sure that these posts get a lot of ‘likes’. *Jess looks at fake celebrities on social media. She is inspired by the ‘Instagram model’ and the possibilities of becoming famous through a few pictures.*

Jess follows the ‘fake celebrities’ on Snapchat and Instagram. After all, these are the most popular social media sites at the moment. But while the ‘fake celebrities’ post ‘perfect images’ to both Snapchat and Instagram, young people Jess’ age use Snapchat and Instagram differently. Snapchat is for ‘funny stories’, ‘dog filters’, and ‘ugly pictures with double chins’. Instagram, on the other hand, is for ‘perfect images’. Jess says that Instagram is ‘your space to express yourself’, it’s like your ‘little platform’. She says that you can ‘photoshop’ your pictures and this can help you to look a bit like the ‘fake celebrities’. *Jess can use Instagram to post perfect images that are photoshopped and look a bit like the fake celebrities* she follows.

### *Jess’ engagement with social media for health*

Jess is ‘tired’. She stayed up until ‘1 a.m. going through her [social media] feed’, and she had to get up at ‘6:30’ for school. This is typical for Jess. But last night ‘everyone’ was up late. ‘BB’, the latest teen celebrity, had an Instaspree (posting lots of posts in a short period of time) and everyone was Snapchatting about BB’s posts. BB is one of the ‘fake celebrities’. ‘Most of her isn’t real’. Everyone knows it’s all ‘money and surgery’. BB always tries to fake it though. She adds hashtags like #fit #gym #hardwork to try to trick everyone into believing that her figure has been developed through exercise. Yet, even though everyone knows BB is ‘fake’, girls like Jess ‘still want to grow up to be like’ her. *Teen celebs try to trick users of social media to think their figures are real and are a result of exercise. Girls like Jess look up to these ‘fake celebrities’ and want to be like them.*

Sarah, Jess’ friend, sent a Snapchat being all jealous of BB, ‘oh, I wish I looked like her’. Sarah was keen to find a way to look like BB. She later Snapchatted: ‘I’ve seen on social media one of these waist trainers. My Mum said if you want one you can get one, I’ll pay half you pay half’. Jess wasn’t sure about the waist trainer, and sent a Snapchat, saying that it ‘crushes your ribs’. Jess didn’t want to use the waist trainer like Sarah, but she did want to look like BB. *On social media, girls learn about harmful devices that they can use to change*

*their shape and figure. Jess is critical of these devices and she **knows** that the use of some these devices **can result in harm**.*

Jess wanted to find other ways to help her look like BB, a way that kept her ribs intact. So Jess scrolled through her Instagram home page. She found images and videos that said: ‘Eating 10 kilograms of protein will help you build muscle every day’; ‘The benefits of a hot and cold shower’; ‘Sleep on your left side’ to benefit ‘your heart’; ‘Smoothie that ... gets rid of the bacteria on your face ... and gives you *so* much energy’. Jess was bombarded with these health ‘short-cuts’, all of which she could use. But Jess found it difficult to determine what would work and what wouldn’t. She is aware that information on social media is ‘not always true’. There is ‘no filter’ and sometimes it can ‘be just a scam’. It’s like Trump’s fake news, ‘#runfromTrump’. In addition to this, although young people Jess’ age trust social media posts made by the government, health, and wellbeing organisations and sports men and women, the posts made by these reputable accounts often share the same types of information that Jess knows to be ‘fake’ or harmful. *Jess was bombarded with **information** on social media about how she can **change her shape and figure**. Jess found it **difficult** to work out **what information was credible and legitimate**.*

Jess decided that her only option was ‘Photoshop’. Photoshop was something she could trust and control. She could take ‘a picture and edit it and actually look great’. Jess knows that this is what all the ‘celebrities’ and ‘models’ really do. So Jess spent two hours, in between Snapchatting Sarah, trying to get something ‘perfect’ to post. But although Jess was Photoshopping her photo, she didn’t want it to look fake. Sometimes ‘you can just tell that they are fake’, ‘you can see that they’ve Photoshopped it’. Jess wanted the real kind of fake; something that would present the ‘perfect image’ of the ‘real her’. *Jess decided to **Photoshop her pictures** to try to **look like the fake celebrities**. Photoshop meant that she could portray the **perfect image of the real her**.*

Jess posted the picture to Instagram. She immediately got loads of likes. By the time she woke up, she had 200 (which is good). The Photoshop had worked and she had ‘faked it’ well. To Jess’ disappointment, however, she didn’t get any comments. Comments are better than likes. BB always got loads of comments, and ‘thousands, millions’ of likes. Jess didn’t understand what she was doing wrong. Try again she thought; try filters as well – the ones the celebs use. The filters that make you think, ‘oh, that is me and I look the bomb’. Failing that, Jess said she’ll have to copy Sarah and get a waist trainer. *Jess’ picture received a lot of likes but no comments. This signalled to Jess that she needed to take **more extreme measures** to ensure her pictures received comments and likes. Jess considered the **use of the harmful devices** so she could look more like the fake celebrities.*

### *Narrative summary*

Jess looks at **fake celebrities** on social media. She is inspired by the ‘Instagram model’ and the possibility of becoming famous through a few pictures. Jess can

use Instagram to **post perfect images** that are **Photoshopped** and look a bit like the **fake celebrities**. Teen celebs try to **trick users** of social media that their figures are **real** and are a **result of exercise**. **Girls like Jess look up** to these ‘fake celebrities’ and **want to be like them**. On social media, young people learn about **harmful devices** that they can use to **change their shape and figure**. **Jess knows** that the use of these devices **can result in harm**. Yet, Jess is bombarded with **information** on social media about how she can **change her shape and figure**, and Jess finds it **difficult** to work out **what information is credible and legitimate**. Jess decided to **Photoshop her pictures** to try to **look like the fake celebrities**. Photoshop meant that she could portray the **perfect image of the real her**. Jess’ picture received a **lot of likes but no comments**. This signalled to Jess that she needed to take **more extreme measures** to ensure her pictures received more comments and likes. Jess considered the **use of the harmful devices** so she could look more like the fake celebrities.

## **Section Two: stakeholder response**

Social media acts as a strong force of ideological persuasion on the ways in which young people believe they should be healthy. Material posted by role models and the bombardment of available unhealthy products can cause a clear suspension of consciousness about how to be a healthy young person. Through modelling the behaviours of others on social media, health becomes a public performance and is associated with displaying a perfect body image. Yet, the powerful influence of social media on young people’s health-related behaviours highlights that social media should be harnessed positively by governments, health and wellbeing organisations, and schools/teachers as an important space in which to educate young people about their health and wellbeing.

### ***Reality***

Young people are immersed in social media. The narrative shows that they are deeply engrossed in social media material shared by their ‘role models’ and that young people live their lives with, by, and through these distant and largely (personally) unknown individuals. The social media spaces in which young people participate in are also awash with unregulated and unsolicited health-related content, and young people are bombarded by unhealthy products. As Jess illustrates, the material accessed from role models, together with the barrage of unhealthy products, can act as a strong force of ideological persuasion about how to manage and present body image in order to be ‘healthy’. In many respects, Jess was being hypnotised by the sheer volume of unhealthy messages in which she was immersed. There is evidence from the narrative to suggest a clear suspension of consciousness that, intensified through her lack of sleep, was causing Jess to exist in an ‘open trance’ where reality meant being ‘unhealthy’. In using social media in a way similar to Jess, young people will be challenged to accept and adopt alternative health-related messages.

It is a concern that the narrative suggests that parents/guardians are doing little to help young people navigate the harmful messages in which they are immersed on social media. Instead, some parents/guardians are (unwittingly) supporting young people to be and become unhealthy. Although access to social media should be treated as a right, the regular use of social media until '1 a.m.' is harmful physiologically and will impact negatively on young people's social and emotional wellbeing. The need for parents to become more educated in order to help young people address such harmful behaviours is further illustrated by the actions of Sarah's mother. The offer of financial support to buy a waist trainer signals that Sarah's mother was unaware of the potential negative impacts of this device on Sarah's health. Equally, Sarah's mother was willing to accept that health-related information on social media would be credible. It is possible that Sarah's mum was trapped in the same 'open trance' state as Sarah.

Despite negative impacts seen in Jess, the underlying actions of ideological persuasion could be used for health promotion. A reality that portrays health as supported by being active, eating well and getting adequate sleep could be presented to young people through role models and increased exposure to 'healthy' information. In seeking out social media as a health promotion tool, the narrative highlights some key content, design, and interactive features of social media into which health educators could tap. In particular, governments, health and wellbeing organisations, and schools/teachers, as well as celebrities, sports men and women, and 'sports' brands need to be aware of the trust young people place in them, and ensure that they, themselves, act responsibly on social media.

### *Health as a public performance*

Health in the narrative was an outward-facing activity. Instead of young people associating health with physical, social, and emotional feelings and behaviours, health was conceptualised by what could be displayed publically and shared on social media. In particular, a portrayal of a healthy body was associated with slenderness. The way in which Jess wanted to display her body on social media suggests that health was perceived to be a static entity that could be obtained, rather than being a dynamic state of multiple thoughts, emotions, and feelings. In turn, social media was useful to Jess because it meant she could control public perceptions of her health. The 'Instagram model' of health could be used to control the aspects of her body she wanted to share and emphasise with, while filters could be applied to ensure that her body conformed to particular idealised standards. Social media is therefore a space in which young people consume and reproduce unhealthy constructions of health in very public and highly visible spaces.

## **Considerations**

### *Young people and adults require appropriate health education*

To mitigate against the acceptance of narrow constructions of health, young people and adults require access to health education that extends beyond the material available on social media. There must be a concerted effort to support young people and adults to discern which types of health information are relevant and can be trusted. Educational activities should be structured through a critical pedagogy lens that allows young people and adults to inquire into their own social media behaviours and the information that is presented to them via social media platforms.

### *Social media should be harnessed by governments, health and wellbeing organisations, and schools/teachers as an important space in which to educate young people about their health and wellbeing*

There are unprecedented opportunities to reach and engage with young people through social media given that social media use is a daily and almost continuous activity. Young people are constantly exposed to an influx of health-related messages, information is widely accessible, dissemination can occur quickly, and material that relates to young people can be easily retrieved. Young people also place a degree of trust in governments, health and wellbeing organisations, and schools/teachers, as well as role models that include celebrities and sports men and women. These stakeholders' uses of social media provide clear opportunities to engage large numbers of young people with health information that is credible and appropriate. Social media is, therefore, a relevant and engaging platform that provides opportunities to engage young people with appropriate information about their health.

## **Section Three: key messages from the case**

This case has illustrated the ways in which young people follow, share, and use health-related information that is shared by reputable social media accounts. The powerful influence of social media on young people's health-related behaviours suggests that social media should be harnessed by governments, health and wellbeing organisations, and schools/teachers as an important space in which to educate young people about their health. Yet, these stakeholders, as well as celebrities, sports men and women and 'sports' brands need to be aware of the trust young people place in them, and ensure that they, too, act responsibly on social media.

Table 6.1 Key messages about reputable content

Characteristics of Young People's Uses of Social Media for Health	Young people follow, share, and use health-related information that is shared by reputable social media accounts. Reputable accounts include the accounts of governments, health and wellbeing organisations, and celebrities, sportsmen and -women and 'sports' brands. Yet, young people are bombarded with information on social media about how they can change their shapes and figures. Some young people find it difficult to work out what information is credible and legitimate.
Stakeholder Response Focused on Young People's Uses of Social Media for Health	<p>Material posted by role models and the bombardment of unhealthy products can cause a clear suspension of consciousness about how to be a healthy young person. Some young people conceptualise health as what can be publically displayed and shared on social media rather than associating it with physical, social, and emotional feelings and behaviours.</p> <p>To address these issues, a reality that portrays health as being active, eating well, and getting adequate sleep could be presented to young people through reputable social media accounts to increase young people's exposure to 'healthy' information.</p>
Considerations for Research, Policy, and/or Practice	<p>Young people and adults require appropriate health education.</p> <p>Social media should be harnessed by governments, health and wellbeing organisations, and schools/teachers as an important space in which to educate young people about their health and wellbeing.</p>

## Note

- 1 The digital animated case study narrative video of Jess can be accessed here: <http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/3059/>